

am.
negroes

63

The NEW INTER-RACE RELATIONS *in the* SOUTH

*Address of Will Winton Alexander
before the Seventy-sixth Annual
Convention of the American Missionary
Association, November 8, 1922*



Commission on Interracial Cooperation

109 Palmer Building

Atlanta, Ga.



WILL WINTON ALEXANDER
Director, Commission on Interracial Cooperation

WILL WINTON ALEXANDER, born Morrisville, Mo., July 15, 1884. A.B., Scarritt-Morrisville College; B.D. Vanderbilt. Licensed Minister M. E. Church, South, 1901; Pastor Belmont Church, Nashville, Tenn.; First Church, Murfreesboro, Tenn.; Assoc. Exec., Army Y. M. C. A., Southern Military Dept.; Director Field Dept., Inter-Ch., World Movement of N. Amer. in Southeastern States since 1919. Vice-Pres. Tenn. Conf. Charities and Corrections; Sec. Tenn. Conf. Social Service Commn. (M. E. Ch. S.), mem. Ex. Com., Com. on After-War Cooperation between Races. Mason (K.T.).

From "Who's Who."

The NEW INTER-RACE
RELATIONS *in the* SOUTH
By WILL WINTON ALEXANDER

I AM conscious as I stand here that the work which I represent was in part made possible by this Association. When it became apparent that it should be continued, you were the first church organization to which we turned for money. Pioneers as you have always been, you had faith in the idea and made an appropriation. About half a dozen of the church boards now support the work, but as has so often been the case in enterprising work for Negroes in America you were first among the churches.

The last week of the world war I traveled from Memphis to the end of the Yazoo Delta, speaking in towns, villages, at cross-roads stores, and on scores of plantations, to the typical pepper-and-salt audiences of that section. In many instances the pepper was very much more in evidence than the salt, for that is the Black Belt of Mississippi, and in most of the counties the Negro population exceeds the white.

I saw during those days what I had never expected to see: White and colored people from those Delta plantations, crowded around a truck on a plantation, or packed to suffocation in a court house or a church, listening as one man to the story of the Nation at war.

I never spoke to those audiences but that there came to my mind the Negro boys over the South—as I had seen them go into the camps. Each time I had a word to say about them as I had seen them and heard from others the story of their life in camp and overseas. Of course the colored people were interested, because I said the very best word I could—and it was a good word,—but I was greatly surprised to find that many of the better white people in the Delta seemed quite as much interested and quite as kindly disposed to those colored boys in the army as towards the white boys who had gone out from the same communities. For a moment, at least, they had found a new interest and a new value in colored boys. I came out of the Delta country conscious of two things:

First, I was conscious of the wonderful patriotism of the unprivileged Negro of the Mississippi Delta. In all the trip, no man

ever suggested that the Negroes would not do their part in every war enterprise. In every community I heard stories of their self-sacrifice; of the amount of Liberty Bonds they had bought; of the amount of Red Cross money they had given; and of their willingness to send their boys into the camps.

I was conscious, moreover, of the wonderful unity that had come to these Delta communities. As white and black crowded together to hear of the war, they were not race conscious. For a moment something greater than race had been laid upon their hearts, and as one man the people of these communities stood face to face with the great task.

Was it strange that many said, "Surely the war has brought to us here in the South one good thing, at least. We shall never again have the racial suspicions and misgivings that have too often marked the previous years. The Negroes have surely demonstrated their right to a larger and better place in our life—to a man's place, for they have played a man's part in the war." This feeling was genuine and general. Then the Armistice was signed, and all of that good-will, which had been such a reality, seemed to have been but a dream. With other reactions from the wartime idealism racial good-will began to recede. From every quarter of the South there came rumors indicating that instead of the war leaving our race relations better, it had left them submerged in a fog of suspicion which nobody on the outside could understand and which grew daily more perplexing to those of us who were near at hand.

There were in the South a number of men who had been very closely related to Negro soldiers and civilians during the war. Dr. M. Ashby Jones, a son of General Lee's chaplain, had been related to the War Department as a special adviser as to the Negro churches and their contributions to the winning of the war. Mr. John J. Eagan, who for many years had manifested a generous interest in the Negro laborer in his plant, was made an assistant to the Secretary of the Navy, and was closely related to the Negro boys in that branch of the service.

There were others, and all of them shared the feeling that the war had brought a larger viewpoint in race relations. This group was therefore easily conscious of the almost complete reversal of sentiment at the signing of the armistice. It was not unnatural that having had this common viewpoint, these Southern men should come together and try to understand what had happened. Little by little the group was enlarged, colored men were turned to, and

for about three months the discussion went on. It was finally decided that the first need was to find out just what the facts were.

A sufficient amount of money for beginning was secured from the War Work Council of the Y. M. C. A. As a first step the attempt was made to secure a cross-section of the thinking of our people on this question. Twelve hundred white men were gathered from all over the South. They were brought together in groups of a hundred. They were the men who make public opinion in our Southern communities. They talked freely and frankly.

At the same time at another place there were brought together 750 Negroes, about a hundred in each group, the thoughtful men of their race. They talked for a week. (There wasn't any difficulty in those days in getting Negroes to talk.) Notes were made of what was said. The Negroes when they assembled, appointed a committee called an interpreting committee. At the end of each meeting there were not only notes on all that had been said, but the interpretation by the Committee. It was a voluminous and important mass of material.

There are some things which Negroes do not say except as they are provoked to say them by white people. A sufficient number of white people spoke in the Negro meetings to provoke full discussion of vexed points. That volume of notes, therefore, represented the heart and mind of seven hundred-fifty of the most intelligent Negroes that could be gathered together in the South.

Out of all this there began to emerge interesting facts, already known to some but with a new significance. One was that the more intelligent Negro and the more intelligent white people of the South had little or no point of contact, or means by which they could understand one another; that they knew little about one another,—particularly white people regarding Negroes of education and culture. (This class of Negroes know white people better than white people know them.)

The racial situation was like this: At the top, where there was intelligence, good-will, moderation, and self-control, the races were far apart, and as they began to drop in intelligence, in opportunity, in self-control, in religion, their contacts were multiplied. There is a place in the lower realms of economic competition, culture and community life, where the races mingle. Race contacts in the South were largely at that lower level, and were contacts that make trouble and could make nothing else.

About that time a study was made of Negro homes in one of our Southern towns. It showed that as the economic efficiency of white and colored homes dropped they came closer together. At the top there was no contact. The better white homes did not know that the better colored homes existed. Then, as the scale of Negro home life grew lower—down below a certain economic line—there began to be contacts between that low strata of Negro life and the more prosperous middle and upper classes of white people, from the fact that the latter drew their servant class from the former. The first hand knowledge, therefore, of these better whites came largely from what they were able to gather from the lower strata of Negro life which makes up the mass of the Negro domestic servants in Southern communities.

As a result of this lack of contact, much of the racial talk among white people was not true; at least the things white people who control public opinion said and thought about Negroes had little basis in first hand, adequate information. The popular picture of the Negro mind which the white people have is the picture of a Negro mind that never did exist. Negroes understand whites better than whites understand Negroes, and yet much that Negroes attribute to whites is not true. The relationships are made difficult by misunderstandings on both sides.

There is much goodwill among whites in the South for Negroes. The difficulty is that it is good-will towards the type of Negro that no longer exists. Old Uncle Tom on the Southern plantation was perhaps never as docile and submissive and contented as he has been pictured; anyway, he exists now only in a story-book and in the minds of many of the better people of the South, who do not realize how completely this type has passed. Such people know absolutely nothing of the intelligent, the ambitious, efficient type of present-day Negro.

Our investigations further revealed that racial difficulties grow largely out of the mental attitudes. We are glad that someone who has authority and wisdom has discovered this also. The study made of the Chicago race riot devotes a long section to the part that rumor and myth played in that affair. Their conclusions agree with ours in this. Because racial difficulties do grow so largely out of mental attitudes, the problem, in so far as there is one, is a problem in racial thinking.

We discovered that by bringing intelligent colored and white men together in frank and friendly discussion this chasm between

them could be bridged. In this way they came to understand one another; and whenever men will sit down in front of a thing and try to understand it, the difficulties are on the way to being removed.

Understanding, therefore, in this as well as in all other human relationships, is the basis of good-will. All we have to do in this country to keep ourselves moving in the direction of the Kingdom of God in relation to this question is to keep the lines clear, to build a sufficient number of contacts, to make a sufficient number of opportunities for men of the two races to understand one another.

We have found a few men in the South who did not want to understand. There are not very many of these. I remember that when we brought a group of white men together to discuss race relations, one very distinguished minister,—a man of great prominence in the community,—when he learned what we were asking him to do, said “I never sat down and talked to Negroes in my life, and I shall not do it.” He walked out. You can do nothing for such a man. He hasn’t the will to understand.

The work of the Commission on Interracial Co-operation has been to try to build a bridge across the gulf that exists between the intelligent white men and intelligent Negroes. There are eight hundred counties in the South that have ten per cent or more of Negro population. We sent a white man and a colored man into each one of those communities to study the general situation and discover who were leaders of the two races, and if there were men in each group who had the confidence of both races.

This very interesting thing developed: White men that white men believe in are as a rule the white men that Negroes believe in. Negroes that honest, intelligent white men believe in are the Negroes that intelligent Negroes believe in. There is no mystery here. Soon we began to discover that in many of the communities we could bring these men together—get them to sit down and talk over the local situation—and that out of that very conversation itself grew a better race attitude. Whenever the habit of conference grew up, not only could a better racial attitude be maintained, but many of the things that vexed the life of the community could be corrected—things which all right-thinking people knew ought to be corrected. Whenever men set themselves to work to correct injustices and wrongs the step resulted in better race relationships.

There are, therefore, two fundamental principles for creating better race relations: Conference and Cooperation.

There had been a conspiracy of silence in the South on this question. Dr. Moton says that Negroes tell white men what they think is safe for white men to know; and that white men tell Negroes what they think Negroes have sense enough to understand. You cannot get along that way. The first step is to bring this question to open, frank discussion. There is nothing about it that cannot be discussed. There is nothing that makes for danger more than whisperings behind closed doors. You in the Northern cities need to be warned that secret organizations and secret methods of dealing with this question only tend to spread the hysteria and stir the passion so common to communities where race questions are acute. This question needs daylight. Underground and secret methods lead to confusion and suffering.

Right race relations are a by-product. If men work together around the concrete task, they will soon change their attitudes to one another. Two men cannot be made to agree by bumping their heads together. Get them together and set them at work on a concrete task, and out of the work will come a better relation.

One difficulty in the South, and in other sections of the country as well, is that we have too little consciousness among the people of either race of those things that pertain to the whole community. The rising tide of community consciousness which is bringing to the proper attention the larger community problems that must be worked at by all will be of great help.

I said a moment ago that this question was largely a question of the way men think. May I briefly sketch to you how we have undertaken to effect public opinion, bearing in mind always that the local community is the unit in which better race relations are built.

Neither the white press nor the Negro press in this country is helping very much in the solution of this problem. The white press is usually unfair regarding Negroes, and the Negro press is quite as onesided in the views given of whites.

The white press has been in the habit of playing up everything bad that the Negro had done, seeming to discover little that could be commended.

The Commission on Interracial Cooperation undertook to correct the worst features of the white press. For instance, Dr.

Blackwell of Virginia watches all the white papers in that State. Whenever one of them begins to violate public safety and is unfair he writes or sees the editor and shows him that instead of helping with the race problem, as the editor being a good citizen desires to do, he is hindering. He points out the specific article and the way in which it has hindered. There are in each state now a number of people who are trying to do this. We hope ultimately to have in each community more than one person trying to help the press to be of service.

Here is an example. A riot seemed inevitable in 1919, in Atlanta. The city didn't want it, but no one knew just what to do. There was great anxiety. One Monday the Constitution, a very progressive and helpful paper, published in flaming headlines, "RACE RIOT BREAKS OUT IN DECATUR." Those who saw it supposed that the expected had come. Full of misgivings I went down town to discover that there was no race riot. Two Negroes had gotten on the car to ride to Decatur, several miles out; they were drinking and made a disturbance on the car by exhibiting a pistol. They left the car near the courthouse at Decatur. One of them was captured by a deputy sheriff and others who gave chase. The other took to the plowed fields. He found himself pursued by a colored boy and a fat "deputy." The deputy was soon outdistanced, and the colored boy said, "Give me the gun; I'll get him." The deputy handed over the gun. The boy came within calling distance of the fugitive and said, "They are trying to get me too; hold on." The fleeing Negro didn't stop and the boy shot him in the leg, captured him and took him back to the courthouse.

Here was an opportunity to tell the community of the perfectly fine way in which a colored boy had helped to enforce the law. The Constitution, sincere in its professed desire to help, called it a race-riot. The habit of seeking the sensational and naming it news simply asserted itself. It should be said, however, that the management of the paper regretted the incident when it was called to its attention. There has been improvement. Two or three weeks ago a serious crime was committed by a colored man. I read of it the next morning—inside the paper near the classified advertising page in about an inch of space. This was as it should be, and the Constitution was helping by its news policy to create better race relations.

To keep the bad things from the headlines is merely negative. The white papers should print the good things which Negroes do,

and the Negro papers should give space to constructive things as well as outrages and injustice suffered. The main reason for not doing so is that they do not know of the good things or how to get information about them. The Commission on Interracial Cooperation is sending to 500 white papers in the South twice each month the best things that Negroes are doing, and to a similar number of Negro papers the constructive things being accomplished through cooperation. Little by little, very slowly, there is a perceptible change in the attitude of the press.

It was said that Southern women were the "Hindenburg Line" in race relations. There were many things to give weight to this view and to make it difficult for Southern women to think and see straight to the essential thing in race relations.

One hundred Southern women were brought together in Memphis in October, 1919. They represented the leadership of the Christian womanhood of the South; they were among the finest of our Southern women. A hundred women more intelligent or influential could not have been found. A number of Negro women were brought to meet them. One of them is in the audience tonight. For two days they sat quietly together, and for the first time the new Southern womanhood heard an intelligent Negro wife and mother tell the story of her life, the story of her home, and the story of her children, as they find life in the South. It was a most remarkable meeting.

The response of these white women was most beautiful. If you will read the little pamphlet, "Southern Women and Race Cooperation," which condenses their utterances, you will find the most clear-cut Christian statement that has ever come out of the South on this question. The story of the Southern Negro women and children in Negro homes reached the mother heart of these white women. Their emotions were deeply stirred, so deeply in fact that some who saw it were afraid of a reaction when the meeting had passed.

Little was done to follow up the Memphis Conference for twelve months afterward. But the women had gone back into their communities with a new viewpoint on this question. The effect of their individual efforts soon began to be manifest. Little by little we began to bring together in their various states the women of the Memphis Conference, together with other women of influence. The plan was to reach the organized white womanhood of the South with the facts regarding Negro women and children.

Today women's organizations with a million and a half members are cooperating. Missionary societies, women's clubs, and the like have pledged themselves to fight lynching and are demanding of those who enforce the law in the South that lynching shall cease. They are pledged to work in their local communities not FOR Negro women but WITH them, that Negro home life and Negro child life may have a better chance.

The men of the South may accomplish little, but when a million and a half women in their organizations have set to work for so worthy a cause, we may confidentially expect that in ten years something worth while will have been brought to pass. (Applause.)

It is difficult for you to understand the meaning of this movement among Southern women. Negro womanhood and Negro homelife have not had proper protection and help. When a million and a half white women in the South understand, as they have not understood before, the things against which Negro homelife battles, there will be a new day for Negro women and Negro homes in the South. (Applause.)

For years under Dr. W. D. Weatherford there have been voluntary classes in the colleges for the study of this question. A few years ago two annual conferences of college professors began to be held, one East and one West of the Mississippi. Teachers of history, economics, and sociology in Southern colleges came together to seek to answer the question, "What can the colleges of the South do to enable students to deal intelligently with this question?"

Today as a result of these conferences and similar efforts, at least fifty colleges of the South have courses in race relations.

In 1921 a number of intelligent colored men spoke in Southern colleges. They proved in some instances the most popular speakers that came during the year. This year in possibly half our colleges Negroes will speak on what the Negro wants and what he ought to have in American life. In not a few cases this will be at the regular chapel or some other hour which will signify the approval of the college authorities. Here is the report of one of these visits to a state school: "I have just come from the most marvelous experience I have ever had," said one of the most intelligent Negroes in America. "I spoke Sunday to the students in the State College in ——. They listened attentively as I told them as frankly as I could what were the dominant hopes of the Negro in America and how they could help secure for the Negro his chance to be a man.

Many of them came up to me at the conclusion and said, 'We believe in what you say and we intend to help make possible the things for which you are striving'."

A way must be found to get this subject before high schools, and into lower grades. The study of the pictures of the riot in Chicago will reveal the presence of boys in knickerbockers. How many of the lynchings in America grow out of the easily susceptible psychology of boys?

The educational authorities in one Southern State are now seeking to get a new text book on civics written from the standpoint of the needs of that State. It will be used in the grades and in high schools. Into it will go a section on what an American's attitude ought to be towards this question.

Much of the above is only in the beginning. Most of it is yet to be done. The problem is not solved. Many things are probably about as bad as they have ever been, but these recent years have seen some things emerge. The following are worthy of mention:

1. In many communities a method has been demonstrated. No community that has had one of these committees for conference and cooperation has had a race riot or a lynching, and in probably forty per cent of the counties of the South there can be found some group seeking to maintain such a committee.

2. The forces working for racial goodwill in America have been unified. There may be a race war, but there is a group of white and colored men down in the South who will not line up on a race issue. They are working and will continue to work for the good of the whole group. They have come to know one another with a new confidence. Such groups are a foundation upon which can be built race relations. Men talk about it as though it were some abstract thing. Race relations are just human relations. The building up of a constantly enlarging group of white and colored men in America, men who stand together, is the only basis upon which can be built better race relationships. Men are persons first. The color is secondary.

3. Never before since the Civil War has the Negro had such a chance to speak for himself. Dr. Ashby Jones has been saying to his audiences, "Whatever you think about this question, in the

interests of good sportsmanship you have got to hear this colored man, and hear with an open mind." There is hardly an important church gathering in the South now where some Negro is not invited to speak. People are studying Negro poetry and music and are giving serious and sympathetic consideration to all these appeals.

4. Not only have Negroes in these days been speaking for themselves, but they have found new voices to speak for them. I have a book of clippings out of the Georgia press. In news item and editorial there is an insistent demand for justice. This is typical of the best Southern dailies, from the Louisville Courier Journal to the New Orleans Times Picayune. The strong words of Governors Dorsey, Bickett, Roberts and Morrow have not heretofore been common among men in their class. The utterances of church bodies and women's clubs are strong and insistent for justice. The conspiracy of silence has been broken. New and mighty voices join with the Negro in his appeal for a better chance.

5. I hold in my hand a story. It is printed in black and white. It is a map of the lynchings in Georgia for the thirty-five years previous to 1922. There had been in that time about 439 lynchings. There are the black spots on the map showing where those lynchings occurred. Less than one-third of the geographical territory of Georgia has had lynchings and less than one-fourth of the population of the State live within that territory. During the thirty-five years previous to 1922, with 439 lynchings, there had been but ONE indictment, so far as the records show. A campaign against lynching in Georgia began with the issue of Governor Dorsey's pamphlet in 1921, covering 135 cases of injustice that had come to his knowledge, and setting forth the difficulties he had encountered in dealing with them. In 1922, there have been eight lynchings in the State and there have been twenty-two indictments. Four men are already in prison for long prison terms. Fifteen others await trial. The greater number of these will be tried, not for mob violence, but for murder, a thing unheard of before in the history of that State.

How has this been done? A lynching took place in a particular county in Georgia. A competent man who understood Georgia spent six weeks working with the local Interracial Committee gathering evidence. They brought before the grand jury the names

THE NEW INTER-RACE

of fifty-six witnesses who were ready to testify against the mob. Four of them were called and as a result six men were indicted.

6. The poor and ignorant everywhere have a hard time in the courts. The Negroes in the South as a class are very poor and very ignorant. During the last year the Interracial State Secretaries helped out with many of these cases of injustice. Some of the victims had been driven away from their homes; some had property taken away without process of law; some had been held for debt, etc.

This work requires funds. In Georgia about \$3,500 was raised for this legal aid. The best lawyers are willing to advise and give money to pay for advice. To fight these cases is to win them. It is significant that the fight has begun. It will be finished when the nation builds a better functioning judicial system. As it is now justice is too largely a luxury for the man who can pay for it.

7. Possibly the thing which has mattered most has been the changed attitude which has come to the white people who have been doing the work. The other day a hospital in a small town in one of the western States lost the little vial of radium it owned. After a very diligent search it was decided that it must have gone out with the soiled bandages from the operating room down into the incinerator and thence into the ash heap. Those ashes were sent half-way across the continent to a chemist that he might rescue the radium which they contained.

Radium in ashes make a very great deal of difference in their value. To many the Negro had been the social ash heap in America. He had been talked of as a problem. But many saw the Negro during the war, how much he contributed and how much of an American he had become. Some went into the laboratory of George Carver at Tuskegee, and realized that he, a black man, had for twenty-eight years worked quietly there, and in that time had probably made more contributions to the scientific development of agriculture than any other Southern scientist, black or white. In the light of such examples, this ash heap was seen to have values greater than radium. The voices of the Fisk singers, the lives of Negro doctors, ministers and farmers, many of whom were trained in the schools that you established a generation ago, today have a

RELATIONS IN THE SOUTH

new meaning. With many others I am convinced that the millions of Negroes in America have something of great value to contribute to American life.

The Negro is not a menace to America. He has proved himself worthy of confidence. He has been and may continue to be a blessing. In the years that are to come he needs the help of those who have voices of influence. He needs unnecessary barriers out of his way, and a chance to demonstrate that under God he is a man and can play a man's part.

For Further Information Address
Commission on Interracial Cooperation
409 Palmer Building
Atlanta, :: :: :: Georgia